



## ***Methods of Analysis***

### **Narrative Analysis**

Stephen Petrina (2019)

For we dream in narrative, daydream in narrative, remember, anticipate, hope, despair, believe, doubt, plan, revise, criticize, construct, gossip, learn, hate, and love by narrative. In order really to live, we make up stories about ourselves and others, about the personal as well as the social past and future. (Hardy, 1968, p. 5)

Narrative, often shorthand for narrative analysis or narrative inquiry, refers to both an ordered representation of fiction or non-fiction *and* a method for making sense of the representations. Alternatively, narrative refers to a process of storying or making stories while narrative analysis refers to destorying and restorying or unmaking and remaking stories. Stories unravel inasmuch as someone or AI unravels them. Analysts are ostensibly challenged to unravel grand narratives, such as the story of human evolution, as well as midsize and small narratives in everyday life. In general terms, narrative analysis addresses two questions (Franzosi, 1998, p. 532): “What is the story?” and “Why is the story told?” or “What is the story’s point?”

As Rimmon-Kenan (1983) asserts, “the presence or absence of a story is what distinguishes narrative from nonnarrative texts” (p. 15). One can conclude that there is no narrative without either story or discourse (i.e., expression) (Chatman, 1975, p. 295; Heilke, 2004, p. 129). Hence, some emphasize narrative analysis of content or theme while others emphasize discourse analysis of syntax or expression. Analysts take for granted that the common form or plot of stories, ‘order established, disturbed, and reestablished,’ or ‘exposition, complication, and resolution,’ once, a few, or many times over, demands specific methods. Herein, analysis refers to “‘loosening up’ the narrative, which includes discerning its parts, testing them for conceptual coherence and consistency in usage, and unearthing the logic of the story” (Heilke, 2004, p. 129). Depending on the narrative and analyst, this assumes either that “demystification is the proper work of analysis” or, rather than reduction, description is analysis proper (Argyros, 1992, p. 559). This is to say that some analysts are oriented to “‘What underlies talk?’ ‘What do people really think?’ [and] ‘Why do people say the things they do?’” while others attempt to stay on the surface of what the story is doing or saying (Edwards, 2006, p. 43). Herein, a story may be understood as a unit, which may defy reduction into parts. As such, narrative analysis focuses on how stories “help shape people’s intuitions about what is and is not the case” (Herman, 1998, p. 87). Indeed, analyzing or unravelling stories does not necessarily entail demystification.

Although in most cases the narrative is prior to analysis, some researchers consider the creation of a story to be analysis (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). Simply stated, a story is experience and imagination serialized in language (i.e., What happened?). Generating stories and scripts from research participants’ experiences and fictions— derivatives from data— is common, albeit more often a practice of restorying or remaking stories out of stories than crafting anew (Kim, 2006).

Take for instance a “human interest” story— a true story— in *The Mirror* in October 2019: “A woman is told her ex-boyfriend has died and grieves the loss, only to come across him a few years later, very much alive and working in a local restaurant.” After he disappeared and before she had “time to investigate, her ex’s mum messaged her to say her son had died” (Pochin, 2019). There are a number of analysis options. One option is judging how compelling the premise is and how well the dramatic arc sustains interest across the story’s exposition,

complication, and resolution. Another is pulling on a loose thread to unravel the story, which is the option taken by a commenter: “Doubt it’s his mum ‘messaging’ could be anyone. Even the dead guy lol.” A third option is following the story’s premise and plot: the feasibility of disappearing by faking death. More common than most think, there are various ways to disappear or be disappeared (Lavoipierre, 2019). A fourth option is breaking down the differentiated syntax of the action and speakers (woman telling the story and news reporter retelling the story). Eventually, options for analysis tend to a challenge of restorying yet again.

Of course, not all stories are good stories or true stories. For the most part, a good story has a “wow factor,” meaning that the content, context, and way the story is told impress the audience. With that, a good story has “stickiness,” meaning that the story sticks with the audience or is easily remembered as it leaves an impression (Pappers, 2014). Cynics nonetheless argue that in media, the driving criterion for a judging a good story is whether it makes money. True stories beg the criterion of believability. Judgment of stories is pervasive across social media and everyone is an analyst and critic. Audiences suspend disbelief when necessary but at the same time search for loose threads to pull and unravel stories. Among the harshest critics are those arguing that social media essentially provides “superficial observations of the world around us rather than deep analysis, shrill opinion rather than considered judgment” (Keen, 2007, p. 16). Certainly, there are a lot of schlock stories generated by media producers, whether amateur or professional. Similarly, there are a lot of schlock data-based, research-driven stories, generated by artistic and narrative analysts. Given the advantage of original narratives, ought these research stories otherwise improve over the originals? Ought narrative analysis make a bad narrative look good? Stated otherwise, ought narrative analysis make an uninteresting story interesting? Ought analysis test the truth content of a true story?

These criteria and questions take on weight once typologies of stories are considered. Among other genres, narratives or stories include “nursery rhymes, poems, songs, traditional stories, and stories made up by the teacher, the children, and their families” (Soderman, Clevenger, & Kent, 2013, p. 38). Perhaps the Cree have the most effective typology. Cree authors report three major genres. The first is *kakêskihkêmwina* or counseling texts. The second is *âtayôhkêwina* or legendary texts (i.e., sacred texts and myths) and the third is *âcimowina* or factual accounts. The *âcimowina* include funny little stories, typically the domain of elders “because they have the maturity to use their own foolish mistakes to instruct,” and autobiographical stories (*âcimisowina*), again a domain of elders “whose experience can be useful to others” (Ahenakew quoted in Darnell, 1989, p. 604). Counseling and legendary texts historically involve stringent protocols and rules for transmission. Since the 1960s through the “narrative turn,” it became fashionable to reduce indigenous oral traditions and texts to stories and storytelling. Inasmuch as this exalts settler traditions it trivializes indigenous traditions (Henige, 2009). Narrativization and storification, and by implication narrative analysis, have limits.

Enduring stories do not change, very much. Or do they? One might claim that no amount of analysis can improve on sacred narratives, yet the history of theology proves otherwise. Stories of evolution, genetics, and sociology, generated through narrative analysis, arguably improve on at least some sacred stories of creation and the proliferation of human nature. And while some accept that the purpose of sacred narrative analysis is to “illuminate theological truths and ethical values,” or minimally identify sources (i.e., source criticism), others pursue demystification (Negrov, 2000, p. 395). There are loose threads in “The Greatest Story Ever Told.” Again, what does it mean to unravel this story or any narrative, grand, midsize, or *petit*?

1. What is analysis?
  - a. Argyros (1992, p. 559): Significant portions of our culture, ranging from performance artists to academic critics, have grown increasingly chary of narrative. We tend to express this discomfort in two ways. We either actively pursue the disruption of narrative through antinarrative experiments or we concede the power of narrative but cynically assume that it invariably veils some ideological agenda whose demystification is the proper work of analysis.
  - b. Heilke (2004, p. 129): Third, then, narrative is prior to analysis and the axioms it produces. Analysis is the activity, as its etymology indicates, of "loosening up" the narrative, which includes discerning its parts, testing them for conceptual coherence and consistency in usage, and unearthing the logic of the story. Out of such analysis, which is a critical reflection on the story being told, may come prescriptive axioms of behavior [i.e., the moral of the story].
2. What is Narrative?
  - a. Labov (1972, pp. 359-60): one method of recapitulating past experience by matching a verbal sequence of clauses to the sequence of events which (it is inferred) actually occurred.
  - b. Toolan (1988, p. 7): a perceived sequence of nonrandomly connected events.
  - c. Franzosi (1998, p. 532): According to Labov, the sequence of purely narrative clauses performs the referential function of narrative. Basically, that function deals with the question: What is the story? But narratives are also characterized by a second function— the evaluative function— which deals with the question: Why is the story told? (What is the story's point? See e.g. Toolan 1988:147). A typical story will contain explicit evaluative statements that reveal the teller's attitudes to the events recounted.
  - d. Riessman (2005 p. 1): Narrative analysis in the human sciences refers to a family of approaches to diverse kinds of texts, which have in common a storied form. As nations and governments construct preferred narratives about history, so do social movements, organisations, scientists, other professionals, ethnic/racial groups, and individuals in stories of experience. What makes such diverse texts "narrative" is sequence and consequence: events are selected, organised, connected, and evaluated as meaningful for a particular audience. Storytellers interpret the world and experience in it; they sometimes create moral tales— how the world should be. Narratives represent storied ways of knowing and communicating.
  - e. Critique of Narrative
    - i. Lyotard (1979/1984, p. 60): We no longer have recourse to the grand narratives— we can resort neither to the dialectic of Spirit nor even to the emancipation of humanity as a validation for postmodern scientific discourse. But as we have just seen, the little narrative [*petit recit*] remains the quintessential form of imaginative invention, most particularly in science.
    - ii. Miller (1995, p. 69): the social and psychological function of fictions is what speech-act theorists call "performative." A story is a way of doing things with words. It makes something happen in the real world: for example, it can propose modes of selfhood or ways of behaving that are then imitated in the real world.... Seen from this point of view, fictions may be said to have a tremendous importance not as the accurate reflectors of a culture but as the makers of that culture and as the unostentatious, but therefore all the more effective, policemen of that culture. Fictions keep us in line and tend to make us more like our neighbors.... There is, however, another cultural function of narratives, one going counter to the "policing" function I have just noted. Narratives are a relatively safe or innocuous place in which the reigning assumptions of a given culture can be criticized.
    - iii. Ewick & Silby (1995, p. 222): Narrative can contribute to hegemony by functioning as a means of social control instructing about what is expected and warning about the consequences of nonconformity. Narrative can also contribute to hegemony by colonizing consciousness with well-plotted but implicit accounts of social causality. Finally, and most important, we believe, to the degree that stories depict

understandings about particular persons and events while simultaneously effacing the connections between the particular persons and the social organization of their experience, they hide the grounds of their own plausibility and thus help reproduce the taken-for-granted hegemony.

- iv. Pratt (2015, p. 16): Ricoeur eerily echoes Gombrowicz in this line, and this is the crux of the issue: whether narrative is a necessary structure that we as humans apply to the world to understand it or one of many options that we can use to make sense of the manifold of experience. For the narrativists, the answer is the former—that we cannot but understand the world through narrative.... Gombrowicz has three major critiques of narrative. First, narrative necessarily edits that “life in the raw,” a process required for us to make sense of the world, but a process that nevertheless always leaves us uncomfortable, as when putting on ill-fitting clothes. Any Form that we put on our lives or our experience of the world will fit well in some parts, but it is just impossible to find the thing that fits just right everywhere. This analogy works further because clothes, like Forms, change styles, and one style may seem comfortable now, but in a few years, it will pinch in certain areas or perhaps look rather outdated. The second critique of narrative is that the effects of an action are almost impossible to predict, making the agency valued by narrativists suspect. Gombrowicz’s third critique is that narrative is essentially oriented toward the past, which may help us in evaluating past actions, but is less useful when considering our present lived moment.

### 3. What is a Story?

- a. Franzosi (1998, pp. 519-520): Basically, a *story* refers to a skeletal description of the fundamental events in their natural logical and chronological order (perhaps with an equally skeletal listing of the roles of the characters in the story).
  - i. (p. 520): It is the story—the chrono-logical succession of events—that provides the basic building blocks of narrative. Without story there is no narrative. "The presence or absence of a story is what distinguishes narrative from nonnarrative texts" (Rimmon-Kenan 1983: 15). "A story may be thought of as a journey from one situation to another," wrote Tomashevski (1965:70). A story, in other words, implies a change in situations as expressed by the unfolding of a specific sequence of events. The chronological sequence is a crucial ingredient of any definition of story.
  - ii. (pp. 520-521): Not every sequence of any two temporally ordered events can constitute a story.... The temporal ordering of events in a story is a necessary but not sufficient condition for the emergence of a story. The events in the sequence must be bound together by some principles of logical coherence. At the level of plot the events of a story can form complex sequences by combining events in a variety of ways through enchainment, embedding, and joining.

### 4. What is Narrative Analysis?

- a. Levy (1981, p. 96): (1) On the most fundamental level, a narrative is experienced and *directly interpreted by the reader* or hearer (whether a "naive" audience or a professional interpreter). (2) That experience is then abstracted, generalized, and explained by scholars for the *insight it provides into human nature*. (3) The work (product) is analyzed to discover the means by which it achieves its effects. (4) The teller of the story is studied as *a unique source of inspiration* or as an example of a type. (If the authorship is anonymous, as in folktales and myths, or has its roots recognized in ancient chronicles, the source of the story may be viewed as part of some national or ethnic character.) (5) *The author* is studied to develop and illuminate *the meaning of the work*. (6) Relationships between the author and the work are studied and interpreted as examples of *general processes of expression*, whether the focus is on how the author's personality is visible in the telling or on the means by which self-expression is concealed or transformed.

- b. Ewick & Silby (1995, p. 199): It appears that narrative analysis is celebrated on two grounds. The first is epistemological. It is argued that narratives have the capacity to reveal truths about the social world that are flattened or silenced by an insistence on more traditional methods of social science and legal scholarship. According to this view, social identities and social action, indeed all aspects of the social world, are storied. Consequently, narrative is not just a form that is imposed upon social life (Somers 1992); rather, it is constitutive of that which it represents.... A second and related claim made for narrative scholarship is overtly political. Some scholars contend that narratives have significant subversive or transformative potential. "A central, if not the central, concern underlying narrative studies . . . is to give voice to the subject: to collect, interpret, and present materials about human experiences that preserve this voice of the subject" (Bell 1991:245; see Rollins 1995).... The two virtues that have been claimed for narrative—to reveal truth and to unsettle power—are not separate or unrelated.
- c. Herman (1998, p. 87): A story is a unit that, when combined with other story-units in a densely textured mosaic of narratives, helps constitute a culture's or a subculture's sense of reality. Correlatively, in its postclassical setting the study of narrative form is not just an examination of verbal design. It is also an inquiry into how modes of storytelling— in particular, strategies for ordering— help shape people's intuitions about what is and is not the case.
- a. Riessman (2005 pp. 2-5): Several typologies exist (cf. Cortazzi, 2001; Mishler, 1995). The one I sketch is a heuristic effort to describe a range of contemporary approaches particularly suited to oral narratives of personal experience.
- i. **Thematic analysis.** Emphasis is on the content of a text, “what” is said more than “how” it is said, the “told” rather than the “telling”.
  - ii. **Structural analysis.** Emphasis shifts to the telling, the way a story is told. Although thematic content does not slip away, focus is equally on form— how a teller by selecting particular narrative devices makes a story persuasive. Unlike the thematic approach, language is treated seriously— an object for close investigation – over and beyond its referential content.
  - iii. **Interactional analysis.** Here the emphasis is on the dialogic process between teller and listener. Narratives of experience are occasioned in particular settings, such as medical, social service, and court situations, where storyteller and questioner jointly participate in conversation. Attention to thematic content and narrative structure are not abandoned in the interactional approach, but interest shifts to storytelling as a process of co-construction, where teller and listener create meaning collaboratively.
  - iv. **Performative analysis.** Extending the interactional approach, interest goes beyond the spoken word and, as the stage metaphor implies, storytelling is seen as performance— by a “self” with a past— who involves, persuades, and (perhaps) moves an audience through language and gesture, “doing” rather than telling alone. Variation exists in the performative approach, ranging from dramaturgic to narrative as praxis— a form of social action.
- b. Edwards (2006, pp. 42-43): In focusing on discourse, or talk-in-interaction, the objection is that we are seduced by the surface of things, ignoring what goes on ‘beneath’ or ‘over and above’ or ‘outside’ of discourse. DP [discursive psychology], like conversation analysis (CA) with which it closely allies itself, recommends examining that rich surface, which is what social interaction consists of. Its richness is unimagined by those whose first move is not to record and examine it, but to invent tidy examples of it to illustrate conceptual points, discover causal connections with other things, or to immediately look through it to what lies beneath and beyond. Of course, these notions of *surface* and *depth*, *above* and *beneath* and *beyond*, are locative metaphors. Such metaphors are themselves part of the practices of

everyday accountability and professional conduct – part of the rich surface (if I may use the metaphor while discussing it) of talk and text.

c.